

when asked about US politics. "But I think that this country is so powerful and what goes on politically here is so enormously influential, the rest of the world is entitled to have a say."

Although religious groups denounce him on websites and radio talk shows, he has not received abuse at public meetings; religious people tended not to turn up — "which in a way is a shame", he said. While critical of all religions, he has a particular focus on Christianity. "To be fair, much of the bible is not systematically evil but just plain weird, as you would expect of a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted and 'improved' by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors and copyists, unknown to us and mostly unknown to each other, spanning nine centuries," he writes in *The God Delusion*.

"We pick and choose which bits of scripture to believe, which bits to write off as symbols and allegories. Such picking and choosing is a matter of personal decision, just as much, or as little, as the atheist's decision to follow this moral precept or that, was a personal decision, without an absolute foundation."

He has been encouraged in the early days for the race for president by the apparent distancing of Republican candidates from the Christian right. But he found "very depressing" the profession of faith from the Democratic candidates. "I guess the Democrats have to pretend to be more pious than the Republicans because they are under suspicion of not being."

Dawkins is also keen to give the atheist stance a more positive spin from the often seen negative one — it is all too easy to frame the position as being against things rather than embracing something else. "I would like to see people encouraged to rejoice in the world in which they find themselves, the universe in which they have been born, to take full advantage of the tiny slice of eternity they have been granted."

## Headline matters

It may have been the time of the Nobel prizes but another biologist hit the front page in one British newspaper. **Nigel Williams** reports.

Readers of one newspaper found a startling lead story last month as *The Guardian* ran a piece on the imminent creation of artificial life. Craig Venter, the geneticist who challenged the publicly funded human genome sequencing labs that he could do it faster, was back on the front page with claims again to be creating artificial life that had far-reaching consequences.

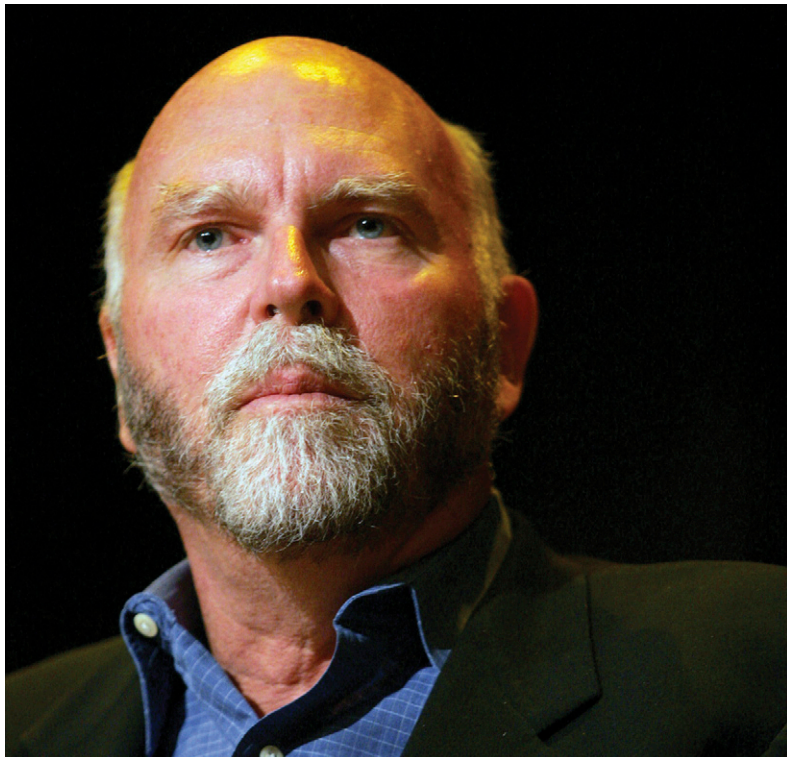
Venter described work to create a synthetic chromosome based on the genome of the bacterium *Mycoplasma genitalium*. The team has already transplanted the genome of one type of bacterium into the cell of another and Venter told the paper he was confident the same technique would work with artificial chromosomes. The paper reported Venter's belief that 'designer genomes' that may be created this way had enormous potential.

While he grabbed the headlines, researchers were quick to challenge the story's prominence. *The Guardian* published a comment by Nick Gay, from the Department of Biochemistry at the University of Cambridge, critical of the paper's story.

"It is as if he had selected a set of car parts, assembled them into a car and then claimed to have invented the car. It will not herald 'a giant leap forward in the development of designer genomes'," he wrote. "It is merely the crudest and most facile kind of reductionism."

Gay flagged up the Nobel prizes announced just a few days later. "It is a feature of great scientific advances that they open up whole new areas of knowledge to view. This is well illustrated by the award this week to Martin Evans, Mario Capecchi and Oliver Smithies for the discovery and exploitation of stem cells."

The newspaper moved on to publish extracts of Venter's forthcoming autobiography, describing the high drama of his time during the human genome project and his earlier, far from ordinary, life.



**High profile:** Craig Venter managed surprising major news coverage ahead of the publication of his biography. (Photo: Michael Nagle, Getty Images.)